FROM. The Forbidden Lecture
by A. Crowley
(Mandrake, Oxon, 1990)

Introduction

Mandrake and the Magus

Early in 1929, Aleister Crowley strode unexpected into the offices of The Mandrake Press in Museum Street, London. Eccentrically clad, and with a shaved head—bald save for a small phallic forelock, Crowley was followed by a porter 'carrying about one hundredweight of Crowley's unpublished typescripts, including a colossal autobiography'.[1]

After flourishing his card, and pronouncing his customary greeting of 'Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the Law', Crowley proceeded to inform the somewhat startled young man behind the desk that he had come to sell him his writings.

The young man was Percy Reginald Stephensen— 'Inky' to his friends—a Rhodes Scholar, author and partner in The Mandrake Press. Like most other Britons, Stephensen's knowledge of Crowley was limited to gossip and the slanderous

attacks against him in the 'popular' newspapers.

Unconventional and defiant, Crowley's ideas and lifestyle had earned him the wrath and condemnation of the nation's self-appointed guardians of morality as early as 1911. At that time a paper, *The Looking Glass*, had accused him of 'unnatural vice' and had hinted that a reconstruction of the ancient Elysian mystery plays he was producing was a mere front for depravity. The publication in 1922 of Crowley's excitingly titled but actually rather tame novel, *The Diary of a Drug Fiend*, had unleashed another tirade of abuse against him, this time from *The Looking Glass's* successors in the field of 'popular' journalism, *John Bull*, and the *Sunday Express*.

The campaign of hatred reached its crescendo in 1923, following the death of a young Oxford scholar, Raoul Loveday, while on a visit to Crowley's Abbey of Thelema at Cefalu in Sicily. Headlines such as 'The King of Depravity' and 'The Wickedest Man in in the World'[2] blazed from pages whose columns without any justification accused Crowley of every crime, from ritual murder to cannibalism.

What, if anything, Crowley had done to draw these attacks upon himself remains a subject of debate. His followers—those who accept the 'Law of Thelema' and regard Crowley as the prophet of a new age—generally share the belief that he suffered them as part of the reaction of the struggling forces of the old aeon against the new. Those seeking for more mundane reasons, or at least a plausible exoteric framework through which subtler esoteric currents may have been manifested, tend towards

the opinion that the papers needed sensation, and Crowley appeared to be an easy target.

The popular papers had excelled themselves during the war in the production of increasingly sensational and jingoistic propaganda 'articles', which apparently delighted their readers. After the war, there was still the 'Bolshevik Threat' to enliven the pages; but by the early Twenties this was becoming too remote to fall back on and newspapers had to search for fresh fodder for a public now accustomed to and demanding sensation.

All his adult life, Crowley had openly defied accepted moral and political thought. James Douglas of the *Sunday Express*, who had initiated the Twenties attacks on Crowley, doubtless realised that Crowley's outspoken activities, suitably embroidered, could provide a bounteous source of the much-needed 'sensation'. Others, most notably the almost laughable *John Bull*, were quick to follow his lead.

When Crowley failed to retaliate against the first articles by taking legal action, the editors must have deemed it safe to declare open war against him.

Crowley's decision not to sue for libel was prompted partly by a feeling of disdain and contempt for his attackers - and anyone foolish enough to listen to them. He also quite sensibly surmised that he could not expect any real justice from the British courts at that particular stage. Possibly, too, he simply underestimated the amount of damage that a hostile press campaign could cause. By the time Crowley had become aware of the severe reper-

cussions, it was too late, as he lacked the funds to take the editors to court. His subsequent plea for justice and fair play, printed in a booklet entitled *An Open Letter to Lord Beaverbrook*,[3] served merely to alert his enemies to his dire financial situation. Assured now that they could continue their defamatory course with impunity, the papers in question redoubled their efforts.

As a result of this campaign, Crowley's name—by the time he presented himself at the office of The Mandrake Press in 1929—had become a virtual household synonym for evil.

Fortunately for Crowley, P. R. Stephensen gave little credence to the rumblings of the popular press and was quite willing to give him a fair hearing before forming any opinions. The conclusion Stephensen reached about Crowley, at the end of a lengthy interview, was that he was essentially 'quite harmless' and had been most unfairly treated. It was a viewpoint that Stephensen was never to revise.

As that first meeting drew to a close, Stephensen invited Crowley to leave the mountain of typescripts behind, so that he, Stephensen, could peruse them at his leisure. He did so and was considerably impressed, subsequently declaring Crowley to be 'one of the greatest prose-writers England has ever produced'. Another meeting was arranged, and Stephensen agreed to start publishing Crowley's works.

A contract was drawn up specifying that *The Stratagem*, a collection of short stories, would be the first of Crowley's writings to be published by The

Mandrake Press.

Stephensen and Crowley saw a great deal of each other over the following months as Stephensen laboured to get *The Stratagem* and other Crowley works through the presses, while keeping up with Mandrake's other publishing commitments. Perhaps surprisingly, in view of Crowley's all too frequent visits to Mandrake's offices and his continual meddling in its affairs and finances, he and Stephensen soon became close friends.

Superficially, the two could not have been more dissimilar. Stephensen was half Crowley's age, decidedly atheistic and non-mystical in outlook, and at that time an avowed communist. Crowley, on the other hand, was convinced of his role as a prophet, as decreed in *The Book of the Law*. He was politically well right-of-centre, despite having developed a deep hatred of fascism, following his expulsion from Italy by Mussolini—a decision heavily influenced by the newspaper slurs against him.

In other ways though, Stephensen and Crowley had much in common. Both were anti-Christian, self-assured, opposed to sexual repression and censorship, and delighted in anything that challenged 'bourgeois' morality and complacency. It was probably this shared contempt for 'the establishment', as well as a mutual love of chess, that forged their friendship.

By September 1929, the printing of *The Stratagem* was completed, and several other Crowley works were in an advanced stage of preparation. But internal and external troubles were fast com-

pounding for 'The Mandrake'. The 'Wall Street Crash' of October caused serious doubts about the continued viability of small quality publishing. At any rate, 'The Mandrake'—under-capitalised and with few 'good sellers'—was beginning to look decidedly shaky, and Edward Goldston (Stephensen's partner) was becoming nervous.

Goldston did not like Crowley who, as Stephensen later remarked, 'had put the Basilisk eye on my unfortunate co-director . . . and frightened hell out of him through sheer deviltry'.[4] Whether this fear was for reasons esoteric, or merely because Goldston judged Crowley and his writings to be a bad business risk, it contributed to matters reaching crisis point.

Late in October, Goldston closed down the offices of The Mandrake Press. He, Stephensen, Crowley and their financial backers were unable to reach any agreement about the future, which prevented any new projects from being undertaken. Work continued on the printing in hand and on the sale of old stock. With business at an impasse and with little else to do, Stephensen decided to retreat for a while until new developments paved the way for some resolution.

Stephensen had a cottage in the village of Knockholt in Kent for 'weekend use', and this was where he retired to. He had been planning for some time to write 'a short literary biography' of Crowley which would draw attention to the absurdity of the foul slanders cast against him. He also intended it to 'prepare the way for a full programme of publishing his books'.

With these projects in mind, Stephensen arranged for Crowley, his wife, and his secretary 'Israel Regardie', to move into a house one door from his own Knockholt home.

Stephensen had just finished work on *The Legend of Aleister Crowley*, as his 'vindication' was entitled, when Crowley came pounding on his door, with disquieting news concerning his forthcoming lecture at Oxford University.

The lecture was the outcome of a meeting arranged a few weeks earlier (through a mutual acquaintance) with a young Oxford student, Arthur Calder-Marshall.[5]

Since the death of Raoul Loveday at Cefalu, Crowley had been the subject of recurring gossip at Oxford. It seemed as if every time Crowley's name appeared in the papers, a new flock of undergraduates arose, eager to discuss awesomely the tragic death of Loveday and the 'wicked man' they erroneously believed to have been the cause of it.

Crowley was, in fact, quite blameless. Loveday had been unfortunate enough to drink some unpurified water, against Crowley's explicit instructions. Loveday contracted enteric fever, a disease rife in the area, and quickly succumbed. That this was the simple truth of the matter was attested to by Dr. Maggio, the physician called in to attend Loveday, and also, eventually, by Loveday's wife, Betty May.[6]

Although the cause of Loveday's death was known to Crowley and his small band of followers at Cefalu, the rest of the world—including Loveday's fellow students at Oxford—knew only what the newspapers told them (the impression they gave

was that something very sinister had happened).

The *Sunday Express* broke the story with an article headlined: 'More Sinister Revelations of Aleister Crowley. Varsity Lad's Death. Dreadful Ordeal of a Young Wife'.[7] The article, and others that followed, were full of innuendo, half-truths and outright lies, designed to foster the impression that Loveday had been the victim of foul play. The details provided were loosely based on the already embroidered accounts of Loveday's wife, Betty May. Desperately short of money and strongly hostile to Crowley, whom she had never liked, Betty May was willing to sell the sort of story required by the scandal-hungry editors.

The absurd stories were given such credence by the general public that a group of Oxford students actually formulated a plot to assassinate Crowley, in retaliation for Loveday's death. Mercifully commonsense prevailed, and the would-be killers persuaded themselves to restrain their punitive expedition until the facts had been properly ascertained. During that Easter term break, two parties set off from Oxford to Cefalu, apparently without each other's knowledge, to investigate the events at the Abbey. Their conclusions were unanimous. Crowley and his community were decidedly 'odd', but nothing sinister was occurring there, and all indications were that Loveday had died of natural causes.

After the results of the two enquiries had been widely discussed at the University, interest in Crowley began to wane. But the regrettable tendency of scandal, to linger in the memory, despite disproof,

was demonstrated at Oxford some six years later when the 'mysterious' death of Loveday at the 'depraved' Crowley's Abbey resurfaced.

In May, 1929, an article in *John Bull* referred to Crowley as 'England's worst man', and the collective student memory showed it had forgotten the innocent outcome of the Loveday investigations.

It was with this misinformation as a background that Arthur Calder-Marshall decided to arrange his meeting with Crowley. His primary motivation seems to have been a desire to interview a man whom he believed to be the personification of evil.

With no small amount of trepidation, Calder-Marshall arrived at the designated meeting-place, which was a restaurant. Presenting himself at the appointed hour, Calder-Marshall was rather taken aback to find the room empty, apart from the waiters and an innocuous-looking elderly gentleman, whom he judged to be a stockbroker.

The 'stockbroker', of course, was none other than 'The Great Beast', Aleister Crowley. Closer inspection revealed that Crowley's head was not bald, as Calder-Marshall had surmised at first, but shaven. For the rest he was of quite normal appearance and devoid of all the paraphernalia that Calder-Marshall had expected would accompany a practising magician. In the interview that followed, there were a number of small surprises for Calder-Marshall, who found many of his other preconceptions about Crowley shattered.

Although almost disappointed to discover that Crowley was not the embodiment of evil he had

anticipated, Calder-Marshall found him an interesting, witty and intelligent speaker.

Calder-Marshall, who had writing aspirations, was a member of the committee of the recently-founded Oxford University Poetry Society. For some time the Society had been attempting, with singular lack of success, to persuade various poets of repute to address its regular meetings. Although more widely known for his occult interests, Crowley was none the less a poet of no small accomplishment, and before the tarnishing of his name his many books of verse had been widely, and often favourably, reviewed.

Apparently, at first, Crowley was quite sceptical about the offer. He was all too well aware of his bad reputation and the human tendency to judge hastily, and strongly suspected that the University authorities would not tolerate his presence. On the other hand, his notoriety had almost completely isolated him from 'polite' society, and he relished the prospect of mingling again with learned young people who shared his love of poetry. Anyway, he had nothing to lose by accepting the offer.

Crowley and Calder-Marshall promptly set a date for the talk: Monday, 3rd February 1930. There remained only the subject of the lecture to be settled. Crowley, in a serious yet also tongue-in-cheek reference to his own notoriety, suggested that Gilles de Rais, the medieval French 'black magician', might be a suitable subject. Gilles de Rais was no poet - at least so far as history records, though he is accredited in most history books with a career of murder and debauch unparalleled even

by the more famous Marquis de Sade.

Crowley, who had evidently made some sort of study of the once respected Marshal of France, queried the popular accounts of de Rais's life. When discussing de Rais, he was clearly often talking about himself, for he found many parallels between his own life and that of the man whose name came to be connected with Bluebeard.

Both Crowley and de Rais were born 'of good family', and had inherited wealth and the potential to be socially respected. Their devil-may-care attitudes and lavish lifestyles had seen the fortunes of both quickly dissipate. De Rais had effectively turned his back on Christianity and delved into alchemy, whilst Crowley had trodden the path of magic and sought to establish his creed of Thelema. In so doing each had invoked the hostile forces of reaction.

Gilles de Rais, for his efforts, had been burnt at the stake by the defenders of Christendom. Crowley, though not suffering so extremely, had been driven from country to country, and had even been referred to by one English newspaper as 'A man we'd like to hang'.[8]

Crowley clearly wondered whether the similarities ended there. Perhaps he planned to suggest in the lecture, the charges of murder and savagery levelled against de Rais were no truer than those of cannibalism which were directed at himself. They could well have been mere cynical fabrications created by those supporting the status quo, to justify the ruthlessness with which they quashed individuals who apparently defied it. Although he

could claim no historical evidence to support this viewpoint, Crowley was well aware that in any conflict it is generally the victors who write the history books, and in the conflict of the Church versus de Rais, it was clearly not the latter who lived to tell the tale.

Calder-Marshall was delighted by the choice of subject as explained by Crowley, and gleefully carried the news back to his fellow committee members of the Poetry Society. The combination of Crowley's dubious reputation and the far more evil one of his subject was sure to draw a full house and at the very least provide an interesting night's entertainment. Fellow committee members appeared to share Calder-Marshall's enthusiasm. The only problem they could see was whether the University authorities would tolerate Crowley's presence.

This would be put to the test, however, for the various societies were required at the beginning of the term to provide the University Proctors with fixture cards outlining their forthcoming activities. Any trouble with the authorities would come with the handing over of the card, which had Crowley's name and the subject of his lecture stated on it.

When a short time elapsed and nothing was heard, the Poetry Society was jubilant. Apparently, the committee's fears were ill-founded and they could look forward to having Mr. Crowley as a speaker.

But their triumph proved to be premature. Literally a matter of days before the lecture was to be given, the committee was informed that it had

been proscribed.

Ironically, if unsurprisingly, Crowley's planned lecture had been terminated by a man of the Church. Father Ronald Knox, then the University's Catholic Chaplain, had heard about the planned lecture and was outraged by it. What he said to the committee can only be imagined, but he evidently managed to 'put the wind up' Calder-Marshall and his fellow members with a threat of disciplinary action.

This was almost certainly bluff, for the University authorities would hardly have been foolish enough to invite the sensation that a ban on Crowley, or subsequent action against the students, undoubtedly would have engendered.

Bluff or not, Father Knox's stratagem worked, and the committee felt compelled to cancel Crowley's lecture.

Understandably aggrieved at the turn of events, the committee held several informal meetings at which possible ways of circumventing the ban were discussed. Of the many plans put forward, that most favoured was to relocate the lecture at some place outside the University. A hired room at the Spread Eagle Tavern in Thame was suggested, with an arrangement to charter a number of buses to ferry students there and back. Lack of time and money made this option difficult, and when it was rumoured that the Proctors would 'raid' any such meeting and 'send down' Oxford students found there, the idea was abandoned.

There remained only the unpleasant task of informing Crowley of the cancellation of his lecture.

This had almost certainly been done unofficially by Calder-Marshall before 30th January when Hugh Speaight, the Poetry Society's secretary, wrote formally to Crowley concerning the situation:

> *'It has come to our knowledge that if your proposed paper is delivered, disciplinary action will be taken involving not only myself but the rest of the Committee of the Society. In these circumstances you will, I trust, understand why we have had to cancel the meeting. I feel I must apologise to you for the trouble I have caused you. I must confess that I had credited the University with more tolerance - or at any rate with a greater sense of humour'.*[9]

In a postscript, Speaight pointed out that no official action had actually been taken but that it had been made clear such action would certainly follow, if Crowley's address went ahead.

Crowley had effectively been banned, though without official or public pronouncement.

If Father Knox had been outraged at the thought of Crowley lecturing, and the students aggrieved by his response, then it is only reasonable to say that Crowley was incensed by it. He straightway dashed off a couple of telegrams to Calder-Marshall and the committee protesting at the cancellation and the implied slur on his character. He then stormed off to find his young friend and publisher, P.R.'Inky' Stephensen, seeking his counsel and help in organ--ising a counter attack.

In many ways, Crowley could not have hoped

for a better ally than Stephensen. In his time at Oxford, not many years earlier, Stephensen had been the victim of heavy-handed and humiliating action on the part of the University authorities. They had forced him to curtail his communist activities, even to the extent of forbidding theoretical political debate, under direct threat of expulsion. Since leaving Oxford, Stephensen had proved himself to be a courageous and tenacious adversary of literary and moral censorship, pouring forth a stream of printed invective against those responsible for each new censorship 'injustice'.

Although doubtless genuinely distressed by Crowley's news of the suppression of his lecture, Stephensen would not have been human if he had ignored the opportunity it presented. It would not only provide another weapon in his general war against censorship and repression, but would also enable him to strike back at those in Oxford who had once ruthlessly quieted him.

Also, Stephensen and Crowley were no fools when it came to business matters, and it must have occurred to them that any publicity arising from the incident would be helpful in selling Crowley's books.

A serious discussion of tactics ensued. Timing was vital if they were to take full advantage of the situation. It seemed pointless for Crowley to disregard the ban and try to deliver the lecture. The students themselves had cancelled it, albeit under pressure from Father Knox, and to arrive in the circumstances might invite ridicule, or worse—undignified ejection by porters. At fifty-four, Crowley was not interested in such shennanigans. Nor did

he want to cause any serious problems for those who had been kind enough to invite him in the first place. When subsequently interviewed and asked why he did not go up to Oxford regardless, Crowley simply replied: 'I do not want to get anyone into trouble'.[10]

In any case, Stephensen and Crowley had decided on another way of circumventing the ban. They planned to publish the text of the address and to distribute it as widely as possible around Oxford. They hoped to attract plenty of interest in the ban by means of press releases and interviews, and thus gain for the address a readership far more extensive than the Poetry Society's audience.

Crowley set about revising the text of the lecture for publication. Perhaps he did not make many alterations, for it still reads like an address, and an extremely witty one at that. However, he did incorporate in one of the later passages an unsubtle 'dig' at the instigator of the ban, Father Knox:

> *'Precious little knowledge filtered through Christianity. It was against the interests of the Church, and in those times it was much easier to suppress people and ideas than it is now, though even today we find priests—at least in Oxford—who appear not to have heard of a certain recent invention by a notorious Magician inspired by the Devil—the Printing Press'.*

Revisions completed, he handed the text to Stephensen, who took it up to London where he used the facilities of 'The Mandrake' to prepare the

typescript for the printers. This accomplished, Stephensen rushed to the Botolph Printing Works, a company he had used recently for the first two volumes of Crowley's autobiography, *The Confessions of Aleister Crowley*, and for several other Mandrake publications.

It was on the presses early on Monday morning, the day the lecture was to have been given. Literally within hours, the first copies of the booklet were ready.

Justifiably proud of their efforts, the Botolph printers placed a small note on the back cover which announced: 'This pamphlet (was) printed at an hour's notice'.

Whilst Stephensen was occupied with the printing, Crowley had been organising publicity, and had arranged for Calder-Marshall to have students as 'Sandwich men on the streets to sell *The Banned Lecture*'.[11]

Late in the morning, Stephensen travelled to Oxford by train with bundles of the first copies of the booklet 'hot off the presses'. That very evening and the following day they were hawked by students promenading up and down the High Street. Trade was brisk, with many who would not have dreamt of attending a Poetry Society meeting handing over sixpence to see what the fuss was all about.

Calder-Marshall had also been to see the Editor of the 'Oxford Mail' and persuaded him to run a story on the lecture, including an interview with Crowley.

A reporter from the 'Mail' travelled down to Knockholt, and conducted a lengthy and quite sympa-

thetic interview with Crowley and Stephensen. That interview, and the article written around it, became the lead story of the Monday paper. It was published under the eye-catching headlines—

SENSATIONAL STORY OF FORBIDDEN OXFORD LECTURE

BAN ON ALEISTER CROWLEY

Undergraduates Threatened With Disciplinary Action

AN AMAZING INTERVIEW

"There is Some Underhand Business Behind This".

In the course of the interview Crowley gave some account of his tribulations with the less reputable Fleet Street papers and, of course, his own side of the story. He also mused humorously about the possible reasons for the Oxford ban, and conjectured:—

'Perhaps the refusal to let me lecture has come because Gilles de Rais is said to have killed 800 children in ritual murder and, in some way, this

was connected with myself, since the accusation that I have not only killed but eaten children is one of the many false statements that has been cirulated about me in the past.

Probably the authorities are afraid that I may kill and eat 800 Oxford undergraduates'.

Crowley also commented: 'I understand there is a Roman Catholic priest behind all this business. I have reason to believe the ban is not official'.[12]

If Stephensen and Crowley had written the article themselves, it could scarcely have been bettered. The evening editions of the 'Mail' even carried a small block, inserted into the text of the article on the front page, announcing the printing and sale of the lecture. It was an effective and gratis advertisement.

The coverage of the suppression of the lecture by the 'Oxford Mail', 'Oxford Times' and various other newspapers doubtless stimulated sales of *The Banned Lecture*. The booklet sold well, and certainly achieved its express purpose of circumventing the ban.

Stephensen quickly arranged a second printing, incorporating a few minor changes made by Crowley, and removing some of the more glaring typographi-cal errors resulting from its hasty composition.

The text that follows in this book is from that [undesignated] second edition, and includes a few extra corrections noted in ink on Crowley's own copy.[13]

All considered, the whole affair of *The Banned Lecture* passed off quite light-heartedly, although the Vice-Chancellor of Oxford University, Francis John Lys, was said to be unamused by the episode, especially with the constant implication that the ban was official. As Lys was the successor to the man who once threatened Stephensen with expulsion for his left-wing activities, and an important personage in the University hierarchy, it seems unlikely that his displeasure would have afflicted the publisher with deep remorse.

Although technically not a Mandrake Press booklet, being published under Stephensen's own name due to the state of affairs with Goldston, *The Banned Lecture* was in every other way a true Mandrake production.[14] Unfortunately for Stephensen and Crowley, its relative success was minor in comparison with the troubles that beset 'The Mandrake', and the resultant 'good' publicity was nowhere near enough to sway public opinion towards a better understanding of Crowley.

The serious onset of the Depression and ongoing trouble with Goldston effectively sealed the fate of The Mandrake Press.

By the middle of 1930, Stephensen had withdrawn completely from The Mandrake Press. Shortly afterwards, then trading as The Mandrake Press Ltd., the business went into voluntary liquidation. One of the last works to carry the Mandrake imprint was *The Legend of Aleister Crowley*, the book written by Stephensen at Knockholt.

In less than two years, Mandrake had published an impressive total of over thirty works. Not

counting The Banned Lecture, three of these were by Crowley, whom Stephensen had envisaged as Mandrake's 'star' author. The three Crowley works were: *Moonchild*, a novel; *The Stratagem*, a collection of short stories, and *The Confessions of Aleister Crowley*[15]— the first two volumes of a projected six volume autobiography. At the time of 'The Mandrake's' closure, the third volume of the autobiography and another collection of short stories, *Golden Twigs*,[16] had reached galley proofs.

The volume has the signal honour of being the first publication under the imprint of The Mandrake Press Ltd. since 1930. It is my fond hope that like the phoenix of its new logo, the Mandrake will arise resplendent from the ashes and will continue successfully with the ambitious publishing plans formulated by Aleister Crowley and P.R. Stephensen sixty years ago.

Keith Richmond,
Melbourne, 1990.